

YBMs: religious identity and consumption among young British Muslims

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Illuminas

This paper aims to explore the importance of religious identity amongst young second- and third-generation British Muslims. It further seeks to understand the influence, if any, religious identity has on their consumer behaviour, examining the global rise of an Islamic consumer against a more localised set of needs and preferences. Primary research for this paper consisted of qualitative interviews with young British Muslims in London and Greater Manchester, as well as a written reflection on identity and consumption completed by participants ahead of their interview. The findings of this research challenge existing assumptions around young British Muslims, and as such will be of interest to brands and research agencies alike.

Background and objectives

Media coverage of British Muslims can tend to focus on the negative, but – driven by global commentary on the rapidly growing purchasing power of the world’s Muslims¹ – Britain is slowly waking up to the idea of a ‘Muslim consumer’.

London has carved out a niche for itself as the centre for Islamic Finance in the West. It was the first non-Islamic host of the World Islamic Economic Forum in 2013, and has encouraged a range of Islamic banks and law firms to operate in the city.² The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) estimated in 2013 that the spending power of British Muslims was £20.5 billion, contributing £31 billion to the UK economy.³

¹ Muslims are estimated to currently represent around a quarter of the global population (see <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/07/worlds-muslim-population-more-widespread-than-you-might-think/>).

² <http://blogs.fco.gov.uk/dominiciernmey/2013/09/12/london-and-dubai-to-help-islamic-finance-thrive/>

³ From ‘The Muslim pound: celebrating the Muslim contribution to the UK economy’, Muslim Council of Britain, 28 October 2013.

Received (in revised form): ?? ?????? ????

Ogilvy & Mather established a ‘bespoke Islamic branding practice’⁴ – Ogilvy Noor – in 2010, aimed at offering advice on how to appeal to the world’s Muslim consumers. Shelina Janmohamed, Vice-President of Ogilvy Noor, wrote in 2013 that British Muslims were ‘a segment crying out to be served’ and described them as ‘a young, brand conscious, well-connected and increasingly affluent consumer segment’.⁵ Janmohamed continues to highlight the diversity of British Muslims’ consumer needs, which extend far beyond the more traditional halal food requirements and into other sectors.

Janmohamed is not alone in this view. The global halal lifestyle industry is valued at \$1.2 trillion,⁶ and with the global Muslim population growth rate forecast at twice that of non-Muslims,⁷ many see a golden opportunity for brands to reach out and capture this market. Interest has focused on the Islamic finance market, as well as halal cosmetics and more modest fashion items (Tarlo & Moors 2013, p. 10). Paul Temporal, in his study of Islamic branding and marketing, says Muslims are ‘a significant market segment that hasn’t yet been studied and understood. It would be foolish to think that Islam as a religion doesn’t influence the needs and wants of its followers’ (Temporal 2011, p. xv).

But can we really see Muslims, globally or in Britain, as a ‘segment’ across all these sectors? That is to say, is their religious identity the most important and influential factor in their consumer behaviour when it comes not only to food, but to fashion and lifestyle choices, too?

This research paper aims therefore to explore the importance of Islam in the identities of young second- and third-generation Muslims living in Britain today. It further attempts to discover whether, and to what extent, such an identity impacts their consumer behaviour.

Muslim identity

In order to better understand the influence an Islamic identity might have on consumer behaviour, we must first address what constitutes an Islamic identity.

The global community of Muslims is referred to as the *ummah* (Arabic, literally ‘nation’ or ‘community’). It is an identification beyond ethnicity,

⁴ <http://www.ogilvynoor.com/index.php/about-us/who-we-are/>

⁵ ‘Why brands need to pay attention to the Muslim pound’, Shelina Janmohamed for ‘The Muslim pound: celebrating the Muslim contribution to the UK economy’, Muslim Council of Britain, WIEF 2013, 28 October 2013.

⁶ ‘The Muslim pound’.

⁷ <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/>

national borders or language, which unites all Muslims in their faith (Figure 1). Its usage can be traced back to the Qur'an where Muslims are referred to as 'the best community'.⁸

Sayyid (2001) describes the *ummah* as having 'greater prominence than other forms of identification' for Muslims, while Yadlin (2002) sees the global Islamic community as a 'reference point' for Muslims, both traditionally and at present. More recently, the importance of the *ummah* has been studied in the context of postmodernism, and the decline of fixed identities and the nation state. Sayyid (2001) calls more contemporary reference to the *ummah* 'an attempt to come to terms with the limits and crises of the nation state', and the *ummah* can be seen as one manifestation of Anderson's (2003) 'imagined communities': unbounded, and linguistically and ethnically impure.

The *ummah* takes on an even greater importance for Muslim minorities, who have had to 're-invent what makes them Muslim,' argues Roy (2004). This phenomenon of focusing on a global Islamic identity rather than an ethnic or national one can be seen as a coping mechanism for the stresses of globalisation and life as a religious minority.

If Islam, and an Islamic identity, is so important to Muslims, one might infer that, to a certain extent, it will have an impact on their behaviour as consumers. Ogilvy Noor's Janmohamed states that '90% of Muslims say

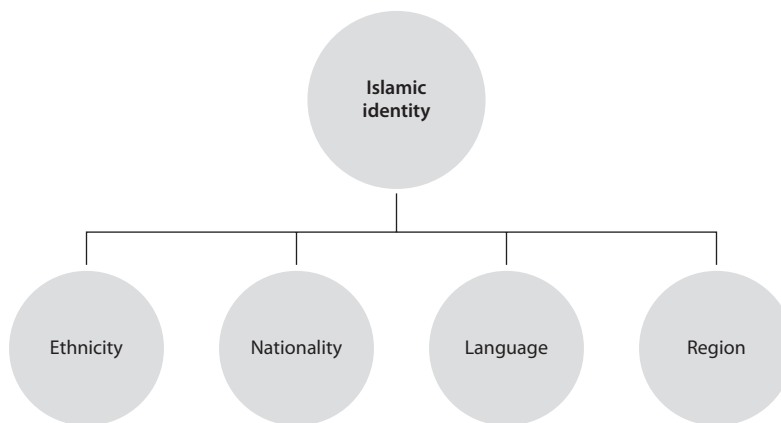


Figure 1 An illustration of Islamic identity

⁸ Qur'an: 3.110: 'You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoy what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Scripture had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient.'

that their faith affects their consumption’,⁹ according to Ogilvy Noor’s global research.

However, surprisingly little research has tackled the question of how important religious identity is in consumer behaviour. Ogilvy Noor has been leading the way in this field, publishing the Noor Brand Index, ‘a quantified ranking of brands’ perceived *Shariah*-friendliness’ (Young, quoted in Temporal 2011, p. 69). Its research has focused primarily on the global Muslim community, but there is a need to discover to what extent, if any, such assertions matter for Muslims living outside Muslim majority countries.

Method

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 females and 11 males between the ages of 17 and 19, all of whom self-identified as Muslims. Research was conducted in two different locations in London, and two in Bolton, Greater Manchester, in order to achieve a balanced view of the Muslim population in the UK.

The decision to focus the research on second-generation young people derived from much academic work on the divergence of ethnic and religious identity among second- and third-generation immigrants (Hamid 2011), and the growing importance of a global, rather than a national, Islamic identity. Age quotas were selected due to previous academic research demonstrating the consolidation of personal identity as a key feature of late adolescence (Tanti *et al.* 2008).

Interviews were conducted in groups of two or three, and males and females were interviewed separately to ensure participants felt comfortable. The interviews were structured to focus on issues of identity and self-description. Focus then shifted to consumer decisions and brand preferences, followed by a discussion of the extent to which such preferences were influenced by participants’ religious identities.

A homework task was also given out prior to attending the group discussion, which focused on identity and brand preferences.

Findings

When asked to describe themselves, and the groups in society they identified with, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’ was, in every case, one of the primary

⁹ ‘The Muslim pound’.

identifications used. This was also prominent in the homework tasks completed. For many, but not all, 'Muslim' was the first response given to questions surrounding identity and self-description.

Interestingly, when asked how their parents would describe them, almost all focused more heavily on ethnicity and their ancestry. Despite a lack of such identifiers in their own responses, most felt ethnic identity would be paramount in their parents' views of them, and inseparable from religion. Such findings are consistent with previous academic research, which has highlighted the shift away from ethnic and towards religious identity among second- and third-generation Muslims in Britain (Hamid 2011). Islam was seen as affecting every aspect of their personality and behaviour:

Religion is a lifestyle. It affects how you shop, how you eat, how you live on a daily basis. (Male, London)

[Islam] distinguishes you from other people in society. Not in a negative way but like, you're proud of it, that's your religion. And it has a positive effect on your life and what you do. (Female, Bolton)

Religion is obviously important. You've been brought up with it from the start. It's how you do everything. It's what life you follow. (Male, Bolton)

Participants, did, however, come up with other identifications that were important to them. Youth was a key theme, with many self-identifying as 'young' or 'teenage', and as part of a larger, non-religious, group of young people:

When you're a teenager that's when you get most of your education and develop your morals, values and stuff and that's a really important part of life. (Female, Bolton)

Although all described a British identity, those living in Greater Manchester focused on local community and the areas in which they lived to a much greater extent than did their peers in London. This is probably the result of their living in a more homogenous community, as the vast majority of Muslims living in Greater Manchester are of Indian or Pakistani origin, and many from specific areas of these countries, such as Mirpur.¹⁰ All those in the Greater Manchester phase of this study were of Indian or Pakistani origin. Census data for Bolton in 2011 shows that Indian and

¹⁰ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/1170952.pdf>

Pakistani communities are concentrated in certain areas of the town.¹¹ This differs from the experiences of those in London, whose ethnic origins were much more varied and encompassed Turkey, the Middle East, North and East Africa, as well as South Asia.

Given the primary and overarching importance of Islam, then, one might reasonably expect faith to be the main influence on the purchase decisions of young British Muslims. But the picture that emerges is far more complex.

Due to the clear rules within Islam regarding the consumption of certain food types and religiously sanctioned method for slaughter, food was universally felt to be one area where Islamic identity had a major role:

I don't go into non-halal places to eat. You just never know what is going on back there, I'd rather the whole place be halal and then I'm comfortable. (Male, Bolton)

Moreover, this attitude was consistent across location, gender, and between both practising and non-practising participants.

Further underlining the importance of food, it was highlighted that, although this was currently the area with the most Muslim-friendly products available, there was still a long way to go before such products really became a part of the mainstream. McDonald's was a frequently cited 'no go', with responses to the lack of halal meat on offer there ranging from complete avoidance to adopting more vegetarian habits. All appreciated the expansion of halal meat into more mainstream food outlets, with many spontaneously citing Subway's recent changes to halal policy as a positive development.¹² Everyone responded enthusiastically to the idea of a 'halal Big Mac', even those few who did not stress the need for expansion of the halal food industry overall:

Are you kidding? I'd be the first through that door! (Male, London)

Such an innovation would not only allow young British Muslims to participate more fully in the mainstream cultural event that is McDonald's, but would also represent an acceptance and recognition of their needs and wants as religiously aware consumers.

With the exception of food, participants did not feel themselves to be 'Islamic consumers'. They showed a noticeable lack of knowledge or interest in Islamic finance. Coping mechanisms, such as donating interest

¹¹ <http://www.bolton.gov.uk/sites/DocumentCentre/Documents/3%20People%20in%20Bolton%202011%20Census%20Ethnicity%20Factfile%20updated%201013.pdf>

¹² <http://www.subway.co.uk/menu/halal.aspx>

earned to charity or keeping money in current accounts rather than savings accounts, were seen to adequately meet any concerns. There was some interest, however, in the government's current moves towards introducing *Shariah*-compliant student financing.¹³ This is perhaps reflective of a current lack of experience in this sector (not all had personal bank accounts yet). As the importance of finance grows, as they mature and become more independent, Islamic finance may become more of a concern than it currently is.

Another area that has received considerable attention recently has been the rise of Islamic, and modest, fashion. Reina Lewis has called fashion the 'third F' of Islamic marketing, after food and finance.¹⁴ As would be expected, discussions around fashion resonated with females much more than males. Indeed, only one male respondent noted any onus on Muslim men to dress in a modest, religiously appropriate fashion.¹⁵ Females all noted Islam's focus on modesty, even those who chose not to follow such a path. However, no one expressed a desire to wear traditional clothing associated with their ethnic origins, nor a particularly strong attachment to generically 'Islamic' clothing, such as *abayas*.¹⁶ Most were navigating a tricky path between fashion and modesty that they felt reflected their place as young Britons, who were also Muslim:

You need to be modest, so nothing too tight or too revealing ... but you can just go to Next, River Island, H&M and if you like a tight top, with short sleeves, you just wear a blazer over it. (Female, Bolton)

As with finance, effective coping mechanisms had been developed. The latest trends from leading high-street retailers were chosen, but adapted to more specific needs, an example being long-sleeved T-shirts worn underneath tops or dresses. Adviya Khan, editor and co-founder of 'Hijablicious', a prominent fashion blog aimed at Muslim girls highlights the growing need of such customers to feel acknowledged by big brands:

It would be nice sometimes to see garments aimed at young women, not just Muslims, who don't want excessive amounts of skin on show, but who still want to look trendy and stylish.¹⁷

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/sharia-compliant-student-finance>

¹⁴ Personal communication with Reina Lewis, 14 August 2014.

¹⁵ Qur'an 24:30: 'Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do.'

¹⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abaya>

¹⁷ Personal communication with Adviya Khan, 9 April 2013.

Reina Lewis, who has written extensively on this subject (e.g. Lewis 2013), reiterates the view that, for some young Muslim consumers, the time has come to be noticed by big brands. She argues that reaching out to these customers would make them feel more ‘included’, and part of the mainstream fashion industry.¹⁸

This research, however, offers a rather more complex view; young British Muslims wished to avoid any unnecessary attention, and disliked the idea of being targeted directly by brands, especially in the fashion world. It was felt that those clothes developed with Muslim consumers in mind would be ‘frumpy’ and ‘plain’, demonstrating a clear lack of confidence in big brands to understand specific religious needs alongside a clear fashion aesthetic. Furthermore, a distinct sense of unease surrounded media exposure and there was a clear sense that this could bring with it negative commentary on Muslims’ place in British society:

Yes, if you’re asking me would I want to see a *hijabi* [girl wearing headscarf] in All Saints advertising, that would be cool. But it wouldn’t be worth the fuss it would cause. I’d rather just not bother! (Female, London)

Remaining part of wider British society was crucial. Many stressed their ‘British’ or ‘British-Indian/Muslim/Pakistani’ identities early on in our discussions. Due in part to the resoundingly negative media coverage of Muslim issues over the past decade, participants were nervous about appearing ‘too demanding’ and all demonstrated a clear desire to be seen as part of British society, perhaps echoing what Goffman would see as an attempt to ‘exemplify the officially accredited values of the society’ (1990, p. 45) wherever possible.

Despite demonstrating less desire to feel targeted by mainstream brands than Adviya, the keen sense of ‘Britishness’ among those interviewed does suggest an attempt to reduce the otherness of the female Muslim body in contemporary Britain.

Recommendations: how to serve this segment

The picture regarding Muslim consumers is not as clear-cut as first thought. Earlier, Ogilvy Noor’s Shelina Janmohamed was quoted as saying that British Muslims were ‘a segment crying out to be served’, yet I discovered a much more complicated and subtle relationship between faith and consumption. While religion is clearly an important (perhaps

¹⁸ Reina Lewis, Faith & Fashion Event, London College of Fashion, 22 May 2014.

the most important) identification for young British Muslims, it does not affect their consumption in a simple, direct way. Rather it presents them with a lifestyle, a worldview and an attitude to society.

In certain sectors, the delineation between Muslim and non-Muslim is clear, crucial and generally well observed, such as with halal vs non-halal food. What is more, there is a clear desire for more innovation and expansion in the halal food sector. Yet, in other areas of consumption, from finance to fashion, technology to cosmetics, there is a difference of opinion on what would constitute an 'Islamic' version of a product. One interpretation, for example, of 'modest' and therefore 'Islamic' clothing may very well differ from another, rendering the provision of specifically Islamic products difficult in many sectors. Further research is certainly required to identify target consumers within a larger 'Muslim' community, and to understand their specific needs and preferences before any future steps are taken to serve a Muslim segment.

Brands must also be conscious of the complicated relationship between faith, contemporary society and the media, which represents an important part of being a Muslim in Britain today. Constant media coverage of world events involving Muslims, and discussion of British Muslims and immigration closer to home made many of my respondents uncomfortable with the very idea of products designed specifically for them.

There are most certainly changes to be made to encourage Muslim customers and engender long-term brand loyalty, however these must not be positioned as Muslim-specific. Feeling a part of the mainstream, yet having distinctive needs met, is crucial, hence the excitement surrounding a halal Big Mac. A great example can be found in the success of O2M nail polish among Muslim consumers. As the formula was found to be permeable, it removed the obstacle to using nail polish among practising Muslim women. Traditional nail polish is not permeable, and therefore prevents thorough washing of the hands or feet before prayer (*wudu*). This product was not developed with Muslim consumers in mind, nor targeted specifically to them, but formed part of a drive by Inglot Cosmetics to target health-conscious consumers (as the formula allowed the nails to breathe).¹⁹ There is potential for more organic cosmetics, devoid of alcohol and animal products, to appeal to the Muslim consumer, too.

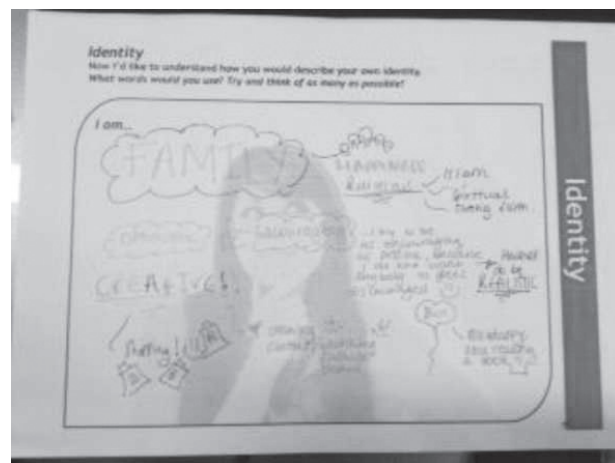
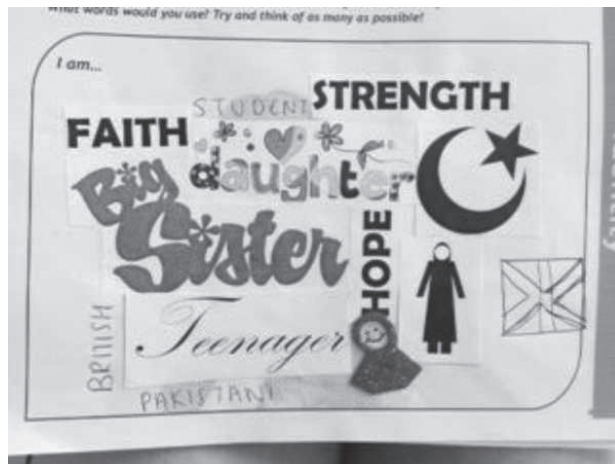
In terms of fashion, once again the emphasis among younger British Muslims was on fitting in and being an active part of society. Muslim women do not want to be targeted with specific store sections or

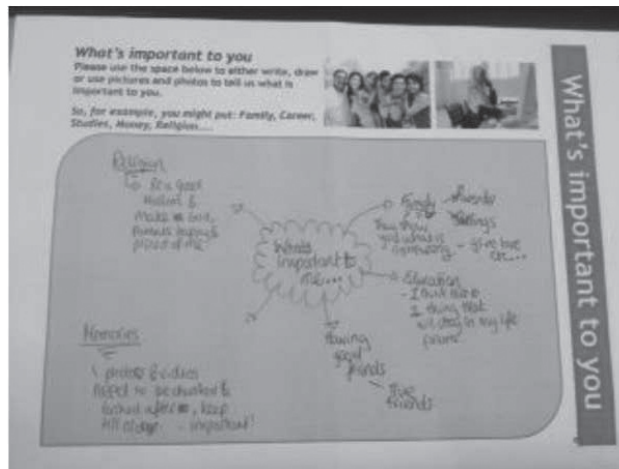
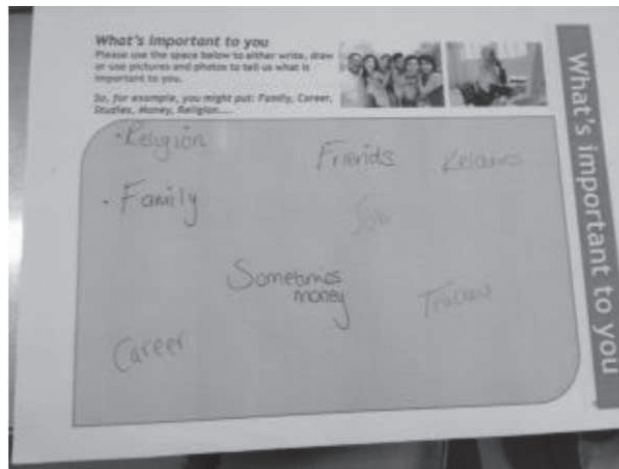
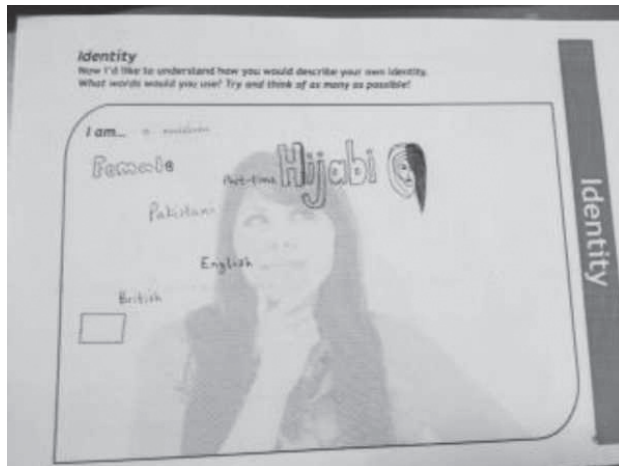
¹⁹ <http://www.nvtimes.com/2013/03/01/business/woiciech-inglot-polish-cosmetics-maker-dies-at-57.html?r=0>

advertising campaigns, but could be reached using already existent, and effective, fashion and lifestyle blogs. There is a great wealth of social media and online presence in this area, and much could be gained from brand engagement with this sector.

Further research must be undertaken in this area to understand the full extent of the relationship between religious identity and consumer behaviour. The desire to remain part of the mainstream represents a great opportunity for brands. However, it is clear that we cannot, as an industry, segment by religious affiliation; the picture for Britain's young Muslims is much more complex, diverse and nuanced than people may assume.

Appendix: a selection of homework tasks





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- Shariah Compliant Student Loans: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/sharia-compliant-student-finance>
- Subway: <http://www.subway.co.uk/menu/halal.aspx>

About the author

Hannah Wright graduated from Cambridge University in 2010, where she read French and Arabic. She first became interested in the role of identity

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